

slide St Saviours

On Sunday 22nd June 1873, St Saviour's Church for the Deaf and Dumb, the first church in the United Kingdom to be built specifically for worship in sign language, was officially opened by the Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb on Oxford Street in London. At the opening, rubbing shoulders with 250 other guests was a deaf man by the name of Daniel Thompson Baker. As speakers took the stage, Baker sat, watching as their words were interpreted by the church's minister, the UK's first officially ordained clergyman for work amongst the deaf, the Rev. Samuel Smith.

Writing later, Smith said:

"When Mr. Baker received the ... Lord's Supper in the church... on its opening day... it was a true *Eucharist*... a real *thanksgiving* to God for the blessings He had vouchsafed to our united endeavours to accomplish this great and good object."

Baker had reason to be pleased. His involvement with the Association had seen it grow from a society with philanthropic potential, into one that provided Deaf people with religious recognition, in a purpose built church, on a prime corner of Oxford Street. Over the next 50 years it would grow further. As it did, so London's Deaf people also grew in visibility. By the 1920s, the spaces of the Association and the Deaf community had coalesced into a London 'Deafscape', a Deaf-authored, Deaf-performed visual reality of city and society.

By 1950, however, Deaf people's relationship with the Association had soured. Now, the Deaf clubs and church were no longer places of recognition, but points of passage for deaf people, unable to speak, and reliant upon signing 'missioners' for help with doctors, hospitals, social security, letter writing, and legal representation.

Since the rise of Disability Studies in the '70s, historians Deaf and hearing, have explained the rise and fall of the turn-of-the-20th-century Deaf community by reference to changes in the spaces that they inhabited. As Victorian giving (so the story goes) gave way to 20th century charitable business, organisations like the Association could no longer afford to present Deaf people as just 'less fortunate'. Instead, they found a marketing edge by first describing, and then self-seekingly making Deaf people the 'most unfortunate'.

Explanations like these serve empowerment histories. However, they don't hold up to scrutiny. Not only do they describe both Deaf people and philanthropists as those who are disappointingly lacking in agency, they present the relationship between the spaces produced for, and by Deaf people within philanthropic networks, as uncritically uncomplicated.

For the last 18 months, we have been working on the first project to really explore the origins of this St Saviour's church... and it's from that research that I want to bring you just one example now. It's an example that focuses on Deaf agency. But it's broader than that, asking questions about philanthropy more generally, and in particular, what might happen to our understanding of Deaf history, and of philanthropy if, instead of being naïve and simplistically causal, we allow them to be canny, and creative... entangled, and diverse, and subversive, and negotiated, and sometimes even accidental.

So, here we go with the example, which take us...

Back to the man with whom I started the paper, Daniel Thompson Baker *image*

And to events some 20 years before the opening of the church.

By '54 Baker had spent 15 years in London building up a successful business as a heraldic painter. As the business grew, and was known to be deaf-run and to employ other deaf people, Baker seems not only to have greatly enjoyed being in an environment where he was able to sign with other Deaf people... but found that the fact of that visible marker of Deaf togetherness engendered more recognition for Deaf people as groups, than it did for Deaf people as individuals.

By '54 then, Baker was looking for other similar 'Deaf space' opportunities.

He didn't, however, jump at just any Deaf gathering. Indeed, he ignored one opportunity that was right under his nose. From about 1841, a group of deaf people had regularly met in the capital to discuss the Bible and pray in sign language. By the 1850s, this meeting had developed into what can only be described as London's first deaf congregation.

But Baker ignored it.

Perhaps, the businessman in him simply shied away from the risk. Despite its popularity with Deaf people, the congregation was poor... and could not afford to pay their minister, or pay more than a short lease on the chapel they used. The gathering was, really, little more than the hobby of a committed, but voluntary Deaf preacher. It was also at best non-denominational, at worst explicitly dissenting. Even at a time when attitudes towards dissenters were thawing, a church without link to the Church of England was still too much of a reputational liability.

Clearly, Baker wasn't just interested in Deaf people coming together, but was looking instrumentally for contexts that would be able to bear a weight of representative burden. And that was something that *was* true of a new charity named the 'Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb'. Appearing in 1854 onto what was a strangely empty field... Philanthropy appears to have largely ignored deaf adults to that point, the Association's committee contained many of London's great and good, and philanthropically generous.

Moreover the committee's first act had signalled their intent. Employing a missionary, a signing ex-teacher of the deaf, they obtained the results of the 1851 census in which Deaf people were identified for the first time, and send him out with the mandate to locate and visit every deaf person resident in metropolitan London, and invite them to a Sunday service.

And not just any Sunday service, but one that explicitly borrowed from the Anglican Prayer Book and Liturgy.

The combination of philanthropic commitment and Anglicanism spoke to Baker's vision, and was enough to start him poking around the Association.

Where, in 1855, he discovered the chaplain, Samuel Smith. *image*

Smith was hearing, but – as an ex-teacher of the deaf who had lived with deaf people since the age of about 14, he signed fluently. He too had reached the conclusion that, it was far more liberating, and far more effective for teaching, for deaf people to inhabit visual spaces, rather than try and force them to play by the rules of the hearing world...

Smith, however, also brought something to the relationship that Baker hadn't, even in his wildest dreams, considered... but he must immediately have seen had HUGE potential, for what Smith also dreamed of (and he hadn't shared this with the Association for fear of getting fired before he even began) was applying that notion of a separate Deaf space beyond education, to Divine Worship – with, at the front of the church, himself... as the first ever fully-ordained minister of the Church of England, to a Deaf congregation.

In idle moments, I like to imagine the signed conversation between Smith and Baker as these points in common came to light... I expect it got quite animated... it certainly birthed, by the summer of 1855, a commitment between the two, and a decision to see if they could, gradually, carefully, use all of the Association's resources to further their individual and joint visions.

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It took them 15 years, which I clearly can't cover in the next 7 minutes, so I'm just going to pull out a few points that speak to some of the ideas that are up on the screen.

entangled

1856 was a groundwork year. One in which you can almost see Baker and Smith nudging the committee a little bit this way, a little bit that way...

By its end, not only was Baker involved with the Association, but by various manoeuvres, he and two other deaf people had found places on the Association's committee. It was easy for them, then, to influence what happened when Smith finally went public with his request for ordination training. Interestingly, the narrative that appears to have finally secured a 'yes', was economic... that, in a cut-throat philanthropic environment, having a clergyman could only secure the Association better leverage on Church-based giving.

diverse

By focusing on economics, Baker and Smith seem have explicitly tried to avoid the moral implications of ordination, but their request still had the effect of dropping a grenade into a pond. Through '57 and '58, as each individual member of the committee wrestled with giving Deaf people an ordained minister, deeply personal moral judgements surfaced about what 'philanthropy to the Deaf' should be about. For some, Deaf separatism was anathema. Deaf people's desires, indeed their best interests, could only be served by belonging to an unfragmented, hearing, Church of England. Some, however, like the evangelical and church reformer Robert Grosvenor, or Lord Ebury as he was by this point, were much more interested by seeing the best done for individual souls. Both he, and the Bishop of London, Tait, offered support – Ebury's was financial. Tait promised to allow Smith to flex the rubrics of the Liturgy as far as was practical so that they could be adapted for use in a signed service.

subversive

Slowly, gently, this support came together. Then, in 1859, Smith completed his training.

And so, their Christmas present to the Association that year was an ultimatum. Either build Deaf people a separate church, or we'll take our support and our clergyman with us, and do it ourselves.

negotiated

The Association had little choice but to fold... but they somehow squirmed their way out of agreeing to build a church by promising instead to build a 'building' – which would contain offices for the Association, but that would *also* house a room that could be used as a *chapel*.

Over, then, to Baker and Smith to either carry out their threat and walk, or also fold... which they did, while reserving the right to change their minds at any moment.

What emerged was a curious stalemate... but also mutual respect... behind which both sides backed away from conflict. Instead, they began to work together. For some ten years, from 1860 to 69, there was a HUGE increase in the Association's activity – more staff, more income, more services.

In fact, Deaf people were so well supplied with opportunities to meet, and so well recognised through the work of the Association that the dream of a separate Church was *almost given up*...

sometimes accidental

And then, out of the blue, an Oxford Street corner plot became available. And it came, irony of ironies, with a caveat from the owner, the Earl of Westminster, who had heard from his relative, Lord Ebury of the long quest for a separate place for Deaf people to worship... that the building to be put on the land, must be a Church.

pause

Canny, creative, entangled, diverse, subversive, negotiated, sometimes even accidental

And... right back at the beginning where we started.

But now with some lingering questions.

Like which came first... the space provided by Victorian *philanthropy* to Deaf people? Or the Deaf space that adopted, inhabited, and ... maybe even sustained the Association's philanthropic network?

And, if the latter, then what *did* happen to so radically disempower Deaf people in the inter-war period? Can we identify one thing? Or was it simply a far more complex, and gradual evolution... spaces flowing... shifts in the careful balance of agency and instrumentalism as the relationship between philanthropists and Deaf community were passed on to the next, and successive *generations*?

And what role, in all of this, did wider society play? Baker sought 'recognition' – but were Deaf people only recognised *within* the spaces of a special, separate church? Did 'special', in fact, mean 'asylum' in the popular imagination... and did asylum mean 'inmates'? Did Deaf people break out to begin to form their own spaces outside of the Association's control... only then to be cast back in as society assumed that they needed looking after?

Our research is hinting at answers... but we still find, even 18 months in, that we're rewriting some of those answers almost on a weekly basis.

One thing *is* certain, though. And that is that the old stories no longer make any sense, and they must be set aside. And in their place, new stories must be written. Stories that are not driven by over-easy assumptions about what 'must have happened' – but instead embrace the personalities, and beliefs, and strengths and flaws of individuals, and the communities that they formed, and the money that they administered, and the morals that they upheld, and the politics that they mobilised, and the spaces that they produced.

I don't think we realised when we started our project just how far we would have to dig to lay bare a foundation upon which to start rebuilding, but we are now slowly beginning to build, and to write those stories afresh...

All I can promise is that we'll bring them and share them with you when we're a bit further along.

Thank you.